



State Representative
Georgia **Gardner**

42ND DISTRICT LEGISLATIVE

Report

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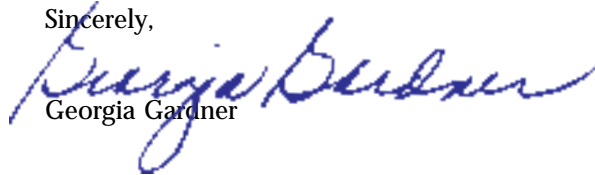
Dear Friends,

The 1997 Legislative Session is over and I think we've accomplished a great deal. For the first time in decades, lawmakers finished their business on time — in 105 days and no special session.

Lawmakers worked hard and fought for our beliefs and for our constituents. Sometimes we prevailed and sometimes we didn't. But we came up with a workable compromise and we concluded the people's business in 105 days. I went to Olympia to accomplish the work of the people and that makes compromise a necessity. I feel we have made good progress. During the summer and fall, I'll be concentrating on transportation issues, local government taxation, performance audits, and safeguarding taxpayer dollars. And, I continue to be active in the areas of land use, natural resources, education, and creating new jobs.

I look forward to seeing you around the District and invite you to call with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,



Georgia Gardner

Land Use/GMA

The Growth Management Act (GMA) was enacted to plan for costs associated with development while preserving the character of our communities, the environment, and rural areas. I believe we need revisions to GMA because I know the difficulties we face here in Whatcom County. My city experience was helpful in this year's land use debate. While I wasn't successful in passing the land bank concept of industrial development, I'll try again in 1998. When it comes to industrial growth, we need to look beyond 20-year planning to ensure we have sufficient area for expansion and that infrastructure will be in place. I believe we can stay within the intent of GMA and still provide better definitions of wetlands, rural areas, and agricultural uses.

Taxes

The most significant tax cut of 1997 that I supported was the lowering of the Business & Occupation Tax (B&O) to pre-1993 levels. This reduction affects those service businesses which experienced tax increases during the fiscal crisis of 1993. The B&O tax cuts passed the Legislature with bi-partisan support and will save businesses over \$300 million over the next four years. As for property tax relief, I endorsed a plan to give nearly all homeowners a

\$205 tax break. The Homeowner's Property Tax Credit targets relief solely to homeowners. Unfortunately, the majority party rejected this plan and instead approved a plan that would give the average homeowner only a \$17 cut each year. Although I voted no and the governor vetoed the plan, this measure will appear on the November ballot to allow voters to decide.

Budget

Lawmakers approved a \$19 billion state budget that is well below the I-601 spending limit and holds the growth of government to its lowest level in 25 years. The governor vetoed many sections of the original budget. Despite a revised spending plan that provided additional money to address major concerns in education, health care, children's programs and the environment, the final budget wasn't all I would have liked, even though we were able to retain needed funds for most programs. I supported increased funding for affordable health care for the working poor, and for modest pay raises for teachers and state employees to keep pace with inflation. Neither of these needs was sufficiently met by the final budget.

Workforce Training

While the economy booms for Puget Sound, the story in our rural communities is slower growth, economic dislocation, and a shrinking job base. Especially in areas dependent upon timber and fisheries, unemployed workers often need education or job training to make the transition to another job. In response, lawmakers in 1997 re-authorized the successful Workforce Training program at our community and technical colleges, although the program was cut by several million dollars. Timber Retraining Benefits, targeted to displaced timber and salmon workers, were also cut, reducing job training opportunities for Whatcom County workers by 85 percent. This cut will leave hundreds of workers without extended unemployment benefits while they complete college and retrain for new jobs. This was a bitter disappointment for me.

Education

Our state constitution says it and I believe it, education is our state's paramount duty. That's why it's so important to continue on the course to improve our public schools through education reform. For the most part, education reform stayed on track. We preserved funding for Readiness-to-Learn programs in Lynden and

Nooksack. We protected some of the levy equalization monies for our relatively underfunded school districts like Nooksack, Meridian, Mount Baker, and Lynden, and we secured nearly \$1.4 million in the capital budget for renovations at Bellingham Voc-Tech College. Bellingham Public Schools also received \$2.1 million for the new Squalicum High School, and Ferndale received almost \$1 million for a middle school addition. However, I was very disappointed that we were unable to save funding for school-to-work transition programs. I'll continue to work hard for our public schools and to stay the course on education reform.

Transportation

One major disappointment this year was the failure of the Legislature to resolve the issue of congestion on our highways. I don't like to raise the gas tax, because it is regressive and has a larger impact on lower and middle income families. I also understand Whatcom County residents have traditionally paid more in gas taxes than we have received in transportation funding. However, Whatcom County would emerge as a big winner if the gas tax is increased. For example, a 7-cent increase in the gas tax would pay for more than \$85 million in highway and road improvements, including extending the I-5 Pace Lane at the border, widening the Guide Meridian (SR 539), and widening the Mt. Baker highway from I-5 to Britton Road. As a border county, trade is crucial for Whatcom County

and is the largest sector of employment. Yet, capacity problems and border delays in Blaine and Lynden curtail the efficiency of our ports, including the Port of Bellingham. Unfortunately, a modest increase in the gas tax never came up for a vote. Despite this failure, we were able to secure \$2.7 million for a road widening project at the truck crossing in Blaine through the 1997 Transportation budget. We also approved a performance audit of the Department of Transportation. I will serve as a member of the oversight committee.



Anna Sturgill, a sophomore at Blaine High School, served as a legislative page for Rep. Gardner during the 1997 session.

Juvenile Justice Reform

Twenty years after the last major rewrite of juvenile justice laws, lawmakers unanimously approved sweeping reforms aimed to hold violent teen

offenders responsible for their actions, give judges more flexibility, and eliminate outdated juvenile sentencing standards. As one who voted in favor of the reforms, I feel extremely proud of the accomplishments lawmakers achieved to improve public safety by punishing the most violent teen offenders, while also providing the ability of our justice system to reach out to troubled youth and prevent future crimes. This new law will send the most violent 16- and 17-year-olds to adult court, add prison time for crimes committed with a firearm, provide additional drug-abuse treatment, and direct more dollars to counties for criminal justice programs.

Welfare Reform

In April, the governor signed a landmark welfare reform bill, which requires that those who can work must do so as a condition of receiving state assistance. I strongly support the governor's WorkFirst plan. Consistent with the new federal welfare reform law, WorkFirst imposes a five-year lifetime limit on welfare benefits, while increasing funding for child care, job training, and other means of support to help families break the cycle of welfare dependency and return to work. Most important, the new law upholds the dignity of work and self-sufficiency that I believe these people want.

Questionnaire

For those who took the time to answer the questionnaire in the last newsletter: Thank You! Your responses have given me good insight and have helped shape my plans for interim work and future legislation.

About This Newsletter...

Newsletters are one of the most effective and efficient ways for me to correspond with the people of the 42nd District. This report cost approximately 27 cents for printing and postage. I routinely mail newsletters to registered voters. However, I realize that people receive a large amount of unsolicited mail, or that some people receive legislative information from other sources. If you prefer not to receive reports like this in the future, please call the toll-free legislative hotline (1-800-562-6000) and request that I remove your name and address from my mailing list. I would also appreciate hearing how I might improve my newsletters to better serve you.